

## 19 American Judaism and interfaith dialogue

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Momentous transformations have taken place in the relationship between the Jewish community and other religious groups in America throughout the twentieth century. Tentatively beginning at the turn of the twentieth century, a movement of interfaith dialogue between Jews and non-Jews served as a catalyst that helped to bring about the changes. This dialogue gained more ground in the decades between the two world wars and advanced considerably following the Second World War. It reached a "golden age" in the late 1960s and 1970s, when an unprecedented momentum for reconciliation and dialogue between the faiths flourished in America. Despite occasional setbacks, the interfaith dialogue helped to improve the relationship between Jews and non-Jews in America, thus helping to advance the well-being of the Jewish community in America.

### THE BEGINNING OF THE DIALOGUE

Interfaith dialogue between Jews and non-Jews in America began in the latter decades of the nineteenth century, primarily between liberal Protestants and Jews. Jewish and Christian clergymen cooperated over civic issues, invited each other to give talks in their congregations, and, at times, participated in interfaith conferences.<sup>1</sup> Such interactions were on a sporadic basis and usually entailed personal friendships between Jewish and Christian religious leaders. A special occasion in the history of interfaith dialogue in America took place in 1893, when the World Parliament of Religions (WPR) convened in Chicago, bringing together Protestants, Catholics, Greek Orthodox Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, Bahai, Muslims, Native Americans, and representatives of other faiths as well. It offered Jewish religious leaders, such as Alexander Kohut, Isaac M. Wise, Kaufmann Kohler, Emil G. Hirsch, and Marcus Jastrow, an opportunity to present their views to a non-Jewish audience and make a case for Judaism. While Hirsch, a Reform rabbi from Chicago, spoke about the need to overcome parochial differences and create one world religion, other Jewish representatives defended Judaism against

what they considered to be erroneous and degrading Christian views on the Jewish faith. In the wake of the WPR, some liberal Jewish and Protestant religious leaders further engaged in dialogue. In particular, Hirsch and Jenkins Lloyd Jones, a Unitarian minister and an architect of the WPR, were committed to interfaith dialogue.<sup>2</sup>

While the WPR gave Judaism a voice and put its representatives on the podium with other leaders of world religions, its long-range effects were limited. In theory, the unprecedented conference reflected a recognition and sense of respect of all religions. However, the WPR was a Protestant initiative, and the Protestant liberal activists who presided over it did not really view non-Protestant religions as equal to their faith.<sup>3</sup> Influenced by theories of religious evolution, which prevailed in the late nineteenth century, liberal Protestants had put their faith at the top of the religious evolutionary ladder. In spite of their relative openness to dialogue and their more critical reading of their own sacred Scriptures, liberal Christians held to a triumphalistic vision of Christianity, which they saw as a faith destined to become the world's all-encompassing religion. Adhering to a messianic view, liberal Christians were certain that they were building the kingdom of God on earth.

In spite of its many limitations, the WPR was a daring act, and in some ways ahead of its time. The liberals who led the event drew fire from conservative Protestants who strongly objected to a dialogue with non-Protestants. In the conservative Protestant view, only those persons who had accepted Jesus as their Savior would be "saved" and could expect eternal life. They insisted that Protestants should look at members of other religious traditions exclusively through missionary lenses and concentrate on spreading the Christian gospel instead of wasting precious time and resources on dialogue. Influenced by a more literal reading of the Bible, conservative Protestants saw special merit in evangelizing the Jews. Similarly, other Christian groups in America during that period were busy propagating Christianity among the Jews.<sup>4</sup> This caused much resentment among Jewish leaders, who viewed the missions as a demonstration of contempt toward Judaism and Jews. As a result, a number of Jewish religious leaders during the late nineteenth century concentrated on defending Judaism against what they considered to be unjustified defamation resulting from the unwillingness of Christians to relate to Judaism as a legitimate faith in America. Jewish tracts from this period point to huge frustrations on the part of Jewish religious leaders in their relation to liberal Christians, whom they had met and from whom they had expected a more respectful attitude toward Judaism.<sup>5</sup>

While interfaith dialogue at this point was limited, certain characteristics of the dialogue were already laid out at this early stage. Many of the issues discussed were not spiritual or theological, yet the dialogue between

Jews and non-Jews was entrusted to clergymen. Representing Judaism and the Jewish community in dialogue with members of other faiths would become an important component of rabbis' work in America and would add to the prestige of the American rabbinate. Rabbis would become the representatives of Judaism and Jewish causes vis-à-vis other faiths in America as well as American society at large. Another feature of the dialogue was that the willingness to meet with Jewish representatives and converse with Jews did not necessarily mean that Christians accepted Judaism as a religion equal to their own, or that Jews gave up on triumphalistic elements of their faith. Christian participants in the dialogue would continue to be representatives of liberal wings of their faith. Most Jewish participants at this early stage of the dialogue were Reform rabbis or rabbis of the fledgling Conservative movement. However, contrary to a prevailing myth, Orthodox rabbis and communities were also engaged in dialogue with Christians. While the very attempts at dialogue during that period should be viewed as a form of recognition and goodwill, it did not bring about any breakthroughs in the relationships between the faiths. Evidently, both Jews and Christians were not yet ready for such a transformation. This changed in the following decades.

#### MORE SYSTEMATIC DIALOGUE (1920-1960)

Attempts at dialogue took a more organized form in the 1920s, thus leading to more permanent results. In 1924, Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish activists established the Committee on Good Will. The motivation for the creation of the committee was more social than theological, as it was due in part to the alarming rise of hate groups in America during the early 1920s. This rise in organized bigotry alarmed Roman Catholics and Jews, who were often targets of such attacks, as well as some liberal Protestants who were also concerned.<sup>6</sup> In 1928, interfaith dialogue took an additional step with the creation of the National Council of Christians and Jews (NCCJ). While the Committee on Good Will concentrated on fighting bigotry, the NCCJ concentrated its efforts on improving the relationship between Jews and Christians and acted as a major vehicle for dialogue between Jewish religious leaders and representatives of Protestant churches and Roman Catholicism. Similar attempts at establishing organized dialogue between Christians and Jews took place in other English-speaking countries.<sup>7</sup>

Even as the interfaith dialogue in America progressed from the 1920s to the 1950s, the relationship between the faiths in America as a whole was far from ideal and the developments in this realm were mixed. During the 1920s and 1930s, America witnessed the rise of virulent anti-Semitic expressions. A number of Catholic and Protestant groups and individuals joined in attacking

Jews, blaming them for the nation's problems. One of the most noted Roman Catholic clergymen during the period, Father Charles Coughlin, a pioneer of radio preaching, used his radio program as a vehicle to attack the Jews and blame them for the troubles of the age.<sup>8</sup> Another promoter of anti-Semitism during this era was Henry Ford, Sr., who financed the distribution of anti-Semitic publications, including an English translation of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a fabricated document alleging that the Jews were conspiring to take over the entire world.<sup>9</sup> Protestant ministers who promoted a reactionary political agenda, such as Gerald L. K. Smith, included attacks on Jews in their rhetoric. Jewish organizations responded to this anti-Semitic wave by institutionalizing their involvement with interfaith dialogue. Realizing that building a good relationship with Christian groups was of utmost importance, they turned it into one of the main items on their agenda. Groups such as the American Jewish Committee, the American Jewish Congress, and the Anti-Defamation League engaged in interfaith dialogue, with their leaders serving as representatives in interfaith forums. Similarly, Jewish federations throughout the nation created communal relationship divisions to combat bigotry and build cordial relationships with other local communities of faith.

While some Christian representatives in the dialogue were sympathetic to Jewish feelings, they did not necessarily represent their denominations as a whole. The mainstream Christian denominations of the time, not to mention the more conservative churches, were far from recognizing Judaism as a legitimate faith. The general standing of mainstream churches in America at that time was that, while Christians should establish cordial relationships with their Jewish neighbors, Judaism was not equal to Christianity and could offer its members neither spiritual comfort and moral guidelines, nor salvation for their souls. Conservative groups and mainstream Christian churches continued their efforts at evangelizing Jews. Not surprisingly, the missions became a major point of contention whenever Christians and Jews engaged in dialogue. From the Jewish point of view, Christian attempts at evangelizing Jews were a stumbling block to a relationship of trust and goodwill. They could not accept the idea that Christians could sincerely express respect toward Jews while at the same time seeking to convert them away from their ancestral faith. Committed to an improvement in the relationship between Christianity and Judaism, Christian participants in the dialogue began distancing themselves from the efforts to evangelize Jews.

An early proponent of a new liberal attitude that recognized Judaism as a legitimate religious tradition was the Unitarian minister John Haynes Holmes of the Community Church in New York. Holmes, who advocated a progressive social and political outlook, became a close friend of Steven

S. Wise, an independent Reform rabbi who shared Holmes' social agenda. As early as the 1920s, the influential minister related to Judaism as a religion that deserved respect and as a faith able to offer its adherents spiritual content and moral guidance. A more systematic advocacy of Holmes's same opinion was offered by Reinhold Niebuhr, one of Protestant America's leading theologians between the 1930s and 1960s. Niebuhr's groundbreaking outlook offered recognition and acceptance of Judaism as a religious tradition equal in worth to Christianity.<sup>10</sup> Through his work as a minister in a working-class neighborhood in Detroit, where he encountered socially active Jewish religious leaders and visited Jewish congregations, Niebuhr concluded that Jews had high moral standards and social consciousness and were therefore not in need of the Gospel. He rejected the triumphalistic Christian Protestant attitudes and consequently militated against the propagation of the Christian gospel among the Jews. With few exceptions, mainstream Protestant theologians, as well as church councils of the early twentieth century, followed in the traditional Christian belief, according to which God's promises to Israel were inherited by the Christian church. Christians reasoned that once the Jews had rejected their Messiah, thereby losing their position as the covenant people and God's first nation, Judaism had no reason to exist except as a group holding witness to the triumph of Christianity. Niebuhr's attitude, which he expressed as early as 1926, signified a revolution in Christian Protestant thinking about Jews and Judaism. He pioneered an approach that accepted the legitimacy of a separate Jewish existence alongside Christianity and the idea that Jews, holding a valid religious tradition of their own, did not have to convert to Christianity.

During the same period, a number of Jewish thinkers also began to change their opinion on the relationship between Judaism and other faiths. In the years following World War I, the triumphalistic Reform Jewish theology of the late nineteenth century weakened considerably and virtually disappeared. A younger generation of Reform thinkers opened up to Christian-Jewish equality as never before. Few followed Stephen Wise when he called on Jews to adopt Jesus as one of their own, or Mordecai Kaplan's Reconstructionist program that suggested that Jews give up on their claim to be the chosen people and move to bless God for having chosen them together with all other nations. However, like their Christian counterparts, Jewish thinkers of the era were laying a foundation for further recognition and dialogue.<sup>11</sup>

While Holmes's and Niebuhr's positions during those years were a minority opinion, the majority of mainline Christians did not yet accept the stance adopted by the progressive ministers. Matters changed after World War II. The camaraderie that developed between Jewish and non-Jewish soldiers serving in the armed forces, as well as among Jewish, Protestant, and

Catholic chaplains, helped to change the relationships between the faiths.<sup>12</sup> Virulent forms of anti-Semitism decreased significantly during the postwar years and the public image of Judaism improved considerably. The social and economic changes that came about in the postwar years were also congenial to progress in the relationship between the faiths. Helped in part by the G. I. Bill, many Jews moved from the working class and immigrant quarters into the middle class and suburbia. To a growing number of Christians, Jews seemed like ordinary law-abiding middle-class citizens who were not to be blamed for America's social, political, or economic problems.<sup>13</sup>

The new atmosphere, which spelled more inclusiveness and acceptance, brought about changes on the theological level as well. Other leading Protestant thinkers followed Niebuhr in advocating the idea that Jews had a vital religious tradition of their own and were not in need of the Christian gospel. During the 1950s and 1960s, prodialogue groups within mainline churches, such as the Presbyterian Church USA or the United Methodist Church, gained the upper hand and a growing number of Protestant denominations decided that they had no more interest in evangelizing Jews. In New York, the Village Presbyterian Church and the Village Temple shared the same house of worship. In the atmosphere created by such an experiment, there was less room for the traditional Christian Replacement Theology and the missionary agenda.<sup>14</sup>

Paradoxically, the Cold War enhanced the atmosphere of interfaith reconciliation, as it helped legitimize middle-class religious expressions in all their varieties, including Judaism, in the American public arena. During the 1950s, the United States was engaged in an intensive global struggle and ideological debate with communism. Participation in religious life became equated with the "American way." Jews participated in the spirit of the age, building hundreds of suburban synagogues, architecturally in line with the tastes and values of middle-class America. Dwight Eisenhower, whose presidency took place during this period, expressed the new mood when he stated that he expected good Americans to be church or synagogue goers. In the 1950s, Judaism became one of the three "public religions" of America.<sup>15</sup> The dialogue between Jews and Christians intensified during this period. The scope of participation in the dialogue considerably enlarged, reaching the mainstream of the religious communities. In New York, Cardinal Francis Spellman, the Roman Catholic leader of the Archdiocese of New York, made interfaith dialogue and reconciliation between the faiths a high priority. Leaders and activists of the Conservative movement played a major role in the reinvigorated dialogue. Influenced by the opinions of Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, Orthodox Jewish leaders were more reluctant to take an active part in the dialogue. They asserted that, while civic cooperation between

members of different faiths was acceptable, theological give and take was forbidden.

Nevertheless, the improved relationship between the faiths made open anti-Semitism in America less and less socially acceptable, although covert forms of anti-Jewish sentiments still ran strong. A sociological survey conducted at the initiative of the Anti-Defamation League in the early 1960s discovered that prejudices against Jews were prevalent among the majority of Christians in America, and they were especially strong among members of the more conservative Christian groups. Members of groups taking part in dialogue with Jews were relatively more tolerant.<sup>16</sup>

#### ADVANCEMENT OF THE DIALOGUE (1960S-1970S)

The 1960s marked an important turning point in the relationships between Jews and members of other faiths in America. The changes were brought about in part by the rise of a Christian ecumenical movement, which revolutionized the relationship between the different Christian churches and between Christianity and other faiths as well. In 1948, mainline Protestant churches had established the World Council of Churches (WCC) with the objective of Christian unity. Initially composed of mainline, mostly national Protestant churches, the WCC's membership grew to include Greek Orthodox, Middle Eastern, and Third World churches as well. In its early years the WCC promoted missions among Jews, but, by the 1960s to 1970s, most affiliated churches changed their approach toward the Jewish community and abandoned their missions among the Jews, instead emphasizing dialogue and recognition.<sup>17</sup>

The most profound global breakthrough that strongly affected the interfaith relations between the religious communities in America occurred during and following Vatican II, the Roman Catholic general council that convened intermittently between 1962 and 1965. The council was initiated by Pope John XXIII (1881-1963), who wished to reform the church, change its relationship to contemporary culture, and bring about a historical reconciliation between the Roman Catholic Church and other faiths. The council attempted to put to rest some of the old hostilities between the different Christian churches, as well as between Christianity and other religions, in order to promote an atmosphere of forgiveness and mutual recognition. In its first stages, the council concentrated on inner reform and intra-Christian relationships. However, the council's ability to influence Jewish-Christian relations was not lost on American Jewish leaders who lobbied for the inclusion of Judaism and the Jewish people in the council agenda for reconciliation.<sup>18</sup> The Anti-Defamation League and the American Jewish Congress sent

representatives to Rome to keep in touch with the council and its leaders. Influenced by the developments in America in the relations between the faiths, American Catholic bishops and dignitaries, such as Monsignor John M. Oesterreicher, were instrumental in advancing the reconciliatory agenda regarding the Jews. Toward its very last sessions, Vatican II unveiled a historic resolution on the relationship between Christianity and Judaism. Among other things, it warned against the accusation of deicide and stated that "the Church . . . cannot forget that she received the revelation of the Old Testament through the people with whom God in His inexpressible mercy concluded the Ancient Covenant . . . the Jews should not be presented as rejected or accused by God."<sup>19</sup>

The resolution opened a new phase in Jewish-Christian relationships and served as a stepping-stone for further dialogue and additional declarations on the part of Christian Churches in their relation to Jews.<sup>20</sup> The Catholic Church's attitude influenced not only American Roman Catholics but also American Protestant groups and even Christian Orthodox churches. A number of Protestant churches as well as American ecumenical groups issued statements on their relations with Jews, including a denial of the deicide charge.<sup>21</sup> Among the first of the Protestant groups to issue such a statement was the Synod of Bishops of the Episcopal Church in the United States:

The charge of deicide against the Jews is a tragic misunderstanding of the inner significance of the crucifixion. To be sure, Jesus was crucified by *some* soldiers at the instigation of *some* Jews. But, this cannot be construed as imputing corporate guilt to every Jew in Jesus' day, much less the Jewish people in subsequent generations. Simple justice alone proclaims the charge of a corporate or inherited curse on the Jewish people to be false.<sup>22</sup>

One immediate result of the new atmosphere in interfaith relationships affected missions. The Roman Catholic Church as well as mainline Protestant churches decided to shut their missionary enterprises among Jews. The position Niebuhr had advocated in the 1920s became much more accepted by liberal Christian thinkers and developed further during the 1960s and 1970s by liberal Protestant theologians such as Roy A. Eckardt, Paul M. Van Buren, and Franklin Littell, and by Catholic thinkers such as David Tracy and John T. Pawliakowski.<sup>23</sup> For the most part, liberal segments of American Christianity gave up on their previous claim to be the sole possessors of the road to salvation. They accepted the idea that other churches and even non-Christian religions could offer moral guidelines and spiritual meaning to their adherents. Nevertheless, evangelizing the Jews has remained the declared agenda of the more conservative Protestant churches

that did not take part in the dialogue, such as the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod or the Southern Baptist Convention, who believe Christianity is the only viable religion and only its adherents have truly found the path to salvation.<sup>24</sup>

The new climate of interfaith dialogue embodied a greater degree of mutual recognition and legitimacy, motivating a keen Christian attempt to eradicate prejudices and establishing a new basis for a relationship between the faiths. Having acquitted the Jews of deicide, liberal Protestants and Catholics went a step further to clear the atmosphere of the hatred that these charges had created. During the late 1960s, Protestants and Catholics systematically examined textbooks that had been used in their religious schools and removed passages with anti-Semitic overtones or that drew a negative portrait of the Jews. A 1972 survey found that the charge of deicide had almost completely disappeared from Christian textbooks in America.<sup>25</sup> Not only liberal churches but conservative ones as well became more sensitive to the manner in which they presented Jews in their publications. A number of American Christian theologians, historians, Biblical scholars, and writers have traced the negative attitudes adopted toward the Jews in the early centuries of Christianity or to theologians in the Middle Ages and the Reformation.<sup>26</sup>

Like their counterparts in Europe, American Christians, both Protestants and Catholics, were motivated, at least in part, by a sense of guilt over the historical role of Christian anti-Jewish accusations in bringing about the mass murder of Jews during World War II. Numerous Christian thinkers determined that Nazi hatred of Jews had been fed by ages of anti-Semitic incitement stemming from Christianity's adverse and hostile attitude toward Judaism and Jews. This has led Christian theologians to examine the significance of the Holocaust for Christianity, in an attempt to ascribe a universal significance to the murder of millions of innocent people.<sup>27</sup> However, this has prompted uneasy feeling among Jewish participants in the dialogue.

Perhaps the most impressive development following the interfaith dialogue has been the growing curiosity among Christian thinkers, scholars, clergy, and students about the Jewish tradition. Many Christian scholars have come to view Judaism as a tradition worth studying because the history of Jews sheds light on the origins of Christianity. Scholarship at the turn of the twenty-first century concerning early Christianity tends to speak about rabbinical Judaism and Christianity as two traditions that developed during the same period, emerging from the same cradle.<sup>28</sup> Christian scholars have also taken an interest in the study of Jewish thought, mysticism, and religious law from the post-Biblical period to the present. The openness on the part of Christians toward the study of Judaism has had an impact on American universities, where it has been incorporated as a discipline of study.

In the atmosphere of reconciliation that developed in the aftermath of the Vatican Council, numerous regional groups of Christians and Jews organized around the nation. Liberal and mainstream Protestants of various denominations, together with Roman Catholics, Greek Orthodox, and Monophysite churches, formed meeting groups with Jews to discuss issues of mutual concern and engage in shared community projects. Congregations would invite each other to visit their sanctuaries and participate as observers in the services. Visiting other communities of faith became a standard feature of Sunday school curriculums in liberal Jewish and Christian communities in America. Likewise, it became customary for Protestant or Catholic congregations to pay visits to Jewish synagogues during services, even though previously synagogues had been, territories reserved exclusively for Jews. While some of the visitors came at the invitation of Jewish friends or as part of interfaith visits or study tours, many were simply curious or in search of a new community of faith.

While the interfaith dialogue has had remarkable achievements in decreasing negative stereotypes and improving relationships between Jews and Christians in America, Jewish observers have noted that official recognition did not necessarily equal true acceptance, and old accusations against Jews did not completely disappear in Christian popular culture. Still others have complained that old anti-Jewish sentiments have at times been replaced by anti-Israeli ones.<sup>29</sup> During the same years of the rapid advancement of the dialogue, many liberal American Christians have become pro-Arab, strongly criticizing Israeli policies. Ironically, the same churches and organizations that take part in the dialogue and recognize Judaism as a legitimate faith have become supporters of anti-Israeli lines. This has become increasingly evident since the 1970s, as liberal Christian groups and organizations in America, including the National Council of Churches, developed a strong commitment to national liberation movements, identifying the Israelis as oppressors. Thus, the relations of liberal Christian churches toward Jews can be defined as somewhat paradoxical – offering Judaism growing recognition, but objecting to the Jewish state and its policies as well as to the political agenda of Jewish organizations in America on Middle Eastern issues. Within the same churches, there are many different voices. On one hand, there are theologians committed to dialoguing with Jews and striving to build an appreciation for Judaism. On the other hand, there are activists who are concerned over Palestinian rights, who view Israel as an oppressor, and who do not necessarily take an interest in improving Christian-Jewish relationships. Nevertheless, Jewish representatives in the dialogue have often seen it as their mission to include Israel on their agenda and to try to convince the non-Jewish participants in the dialogue of the importance

of the Land of Israel and the well-being of the Jewish state for the Jewish people.

#### CONSERVATIVE CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE WITH JEWS

The relationship between conservative Protestants and Jews in America developed along somewhat different lines than the relationship between Jews and liberal Christians. Although they were initially more hesitant to join official dialogue groups, the attitudes of conservative evangelicals toward the Jews have undergone huge transformations throughout the twentieth century. A major component of the evangelical theology is the belief that only those individuals who undergo a personal religious experience of conversion in which they accept Jesus as their savior will be saved and granted eternal life. Conservative evangelicals look on the Christian Bible as the message of God to humanity and as the source of authority on how to live a Christian life. Thus, they are committed to spreading the Christian gospel both in America and abroad. In evangelical eyes, granting legitimacy to the religious beliefs of others is an act of neglect toward them, and so conservative evangelicals do not lend themselves easily to dialoguing with representatives of other faiths. According to the evangelical understanding, neither can Judaism grant salvation to its believers nor can the observance of its precepts have any value or serve any purpose after Christ's death on the Cross.

Many in the evangelical Christian camp subscribe to a premillennialist messianic hope in the Second Coming of Jesus and his thousand-year reign on earth. In contrast to traditional Christian claims to be "true Israel," evangelicals have viewed the Jews as historical Israel and the object of the Biblical prophecies about a glorious future, when the Messiah arrives and Israel is restored to its land. Evangelical Christians have even welcomed the rise of the Zionist movement and the Jewish waves of immigration to Palestine as "signs of the time," indicators that the current era was ending and the apocalyptic events were about to begin.<sup>30</sup> They have seen in the establishment of the State of Israel the beginning of the fulfillment of prophecy and a preparation of the ground for the eventual building of the kingdom of God on earth. The Six-Day War in 1967 had a very different effect on the evangelical-Jewish relationship than on liberal Christian-Jewish attitudes. The war, in which Israel conquered the historical parts of Jerusalem, served as a proof that Israel was indeed born for a purpose, that the messianic times were near, and that the Jewish people would play a crucial role in the events of the End Times. Evangelical support for Israel increased throughout the period from the 1970s to the present, and the Christian Right has become an important component of the pro-Israel lobby in America. While many Jews

have been suspicious of conservative Christians, viewing them as a threat to an open pluralistic society, a number of Jewish leaders and activists have come to appreciate the conservative Christian support.

Until the 1970s, evangelicals and Jews did not have many opportunities to encounter each other, thereby further contributing to the perpetuation of stereotypes on both sides. In conservative Protestant writings, Jews have often been portrayed as the perpetrators of secular ideological and political movements such as communism, socialism, or secular humanism, which, in the conservative view, have aimed to destroy Christian civilization. In the early 1960s, a study by sociologists commissioned by the Anti-Defamation League pointed to more anti-Jewish prejudices among conservative evangelicals than among liberal Protestants or Roman Catholics.<sup>31</sup> However, a similar study in the mid-1980s showed a drastic decline in the extent of such prejudices among the conservatives.<sup>32</sup> This change should be accounted for by the increased evangelical interest and involvement with Jewish and Israeli affairs since the Six Day War in 1967 and the subsequent increase in information available on these topics.

During the 1970s and 1980s, evangelicals warmed up in their relation to Jews even while many Jews suspiciously viewed this evolution. Evangelical missions to the Jews persisted and brought about an evangelical-Jewish movement: Jews who have adopted the evangelical Protestant faith yet have wished to retain their Jewish identity.<sup>33</sup> Missions to the Jews, and the movement of messianic Jews, have become important agents in shaping the evangelical-Jewish relationship, as missionaries have been active in lecturing to evangelical Christians on Israel, distributing pertinent material in churches, and organizing tours to the Holy Land. Ironically, missions to the Jews and the messianic-Jewish community serve as pro-Jewish interest groups within the larger evangelical community, promoting support for Israel and requesting a high priority to evangelization efforts among the Jews. While messianic Jews have strived for recognition as legitimate Jews, mainstream Jewish organizations have refused, as a rule, to dialogue with such groups.

Although conservative Protestants do not recognize the legitimacy of a religious faith not founded on the acceptance of Jesus as a savior, there have been some minor attempts at an evangelical-Jewish dialogue.<sup>34</sup> Leaders and activists who have participated in the dialogue, such as Marvin Wilson or Douglas Young, did not represent missionary organizations but rather voices of intellectuals and academics within evangelical Christianity. On the Jewish side, participants included leaders of Jewish organizations, hailing from different Jewish denominations, including even Orthodoxy. The Holy Land Fellowship of Christians and Jews, founded by the Orthodox Rabbi

Yehiel Eckstein, is among the organizations established in America in the 1980s to promote understanding between conservative Christians and Jews. Eckstein has emphasized the importance of the Holy Land and the State of Israel to Jews and evangelical Christians alike and viewed support for Israel as a common basis for cooperation and understanding between the two groups. Right-wing Orthodox Jews have also come to appreciate the conservative evangelical political agenda. In 1991, Rabbi Daniel Lapin founded a group called Toward Tradition, "a national coalition of Jews and Christians seeking to advance the nation toward traditional, faith based, American principles of limited government, the rule of law... free markets, a strong military, and a moral public culture."<sup>35</sup> Orthodox rabbis such as Lapin decided that they have more in common with conservative Christians than with liberal ones. With the establishment of such new organizations, rabbis such as Eckstein and Lapin have created alternative dialogue groups unaffiliated with more institutionalized mainstream groups.

#### ENLARGING THE SCOPE OF THE DIALOGUE

From the 1960s to the present, the racial and ethnic scope of the dialogue has grown considerably, with non-Western Christians as well as African American and Asian-American religious leaders joining the dialogue groups. While Jewish and Christian veteran participants in the dialogue welcomed representatives of old established communities, such as African-American churches or the fledgling communities of Muslim immigrants, they were not, as a rule, open to new religious movements that came up on the American scene at that time. The Jewish and Christian mainstream related to new religious groups suspiciously as "cults" and did not consider them partners for serious dialogue. Jews, like their Christian counterparts, looked on many of the new religious movements as illegitimate groups that conspired to capture innocent Jewish souls.<sup>36</sup>

Somewhat unexpectedly, observant rabbis, leaders of the emerging neo-Hasidic and Renewal movements in Judaism, were happy to converse with leaders of new religious movements. Zalman Schachter, the "Zeide" (grandfather) of the Renewal movement, and the neo-Hasidic rabbi Shlomo Carlebach participated in conferences with leaders of "alternative" religions, communicating and offering each other recognition and support. The cooperation between the Jewish neo-Hasidic and Renewal rabbis and leaders of new religious movements manifested itself in mutual gatherings and joint publications, and it presented an alternative dialogue based on mutual interest. Representing a Jewish movement of religious revival and return to tradition, Carlebach and Schachter had realized that Judaism needed to compete in an

open market of religions even for the loyalty of its own children. They were interested in learning "the secret" of the new, alternative, religious movements that had successfully attracted young Jews into their midst. Thus, the new advocates of Jewish outreach felt they needed to associate with and learn from those relatively successful groups in order to revitalize their own tradition.

While refusing to engage in dialogue with what they considered to be marginal and disruptive religious groups, the more established dialogue groups nonetheless enlarged their scope considerably. From the 1980s to the present, dialogue with Muslims, although not easy, has become a major item on the Jewish interfaith agenda. For many Muslims, American Jews were associated with Israel and were the supporters of a country that they often resented. Official representatives of Jewish organizations, as well as local Jewish religious leaders, saw it as their duty to represent Judaism without compromising their concern for Israel. However, not all forms of interfaith dialogue between Jews and Muslims in America have come to an end. New modes and forums of what could be called alternative interfaith dialogue developed between Jews and non-Jews. The impetus for a number of Jewish religious leaders to be engaged in alternative avenues of dialogue with Muslims and Christians resulted from their dissenting opinions on Israeli policies and their exception to the extensive backing that the established American Jewish organizations have offered the Jewish state. Representatives of major Jewish organizations, such as the American Jewish Committee and the Anti-Defamation League, have viewed it as their mission to promote recognition and support for Israel and turn the Israeli cause into a major part of the interfaith agenda.

However, not everybody in the Jewish community agreed. In the early 1980s, in the wake of the Israeli war in Lebanon, a number of rabbis, including Jacob Arnold Wolf from K.A.M.-Isaiah Israel in Chicago, founded alternative forms of dialogue in which Jewish leaders came together with Christian and Muslim critics of Israel in an attempt to promote peace negotiations as well as safeguard civil rights in Israel and its occupied territories. Christian and Muslim clergy and laity who had concluded that they could not dialogue with Jewish representatives in official interfaith forums found a common language with Jewish leaders who deviated from the official policy of the Jewish establishment.<sup>37</sup> Alternative forms of dialogue grew throughout the 1990s to the present, correlating with larger developments within the Jewish community in America. On the Jewish liberal side, a growing discontent with the older established representative bodies of American Jews gave rise to the creation of new, alternative ones. With the growing effect of the Intifada in

Israel in the late 1980s and early 1990s, interfaith groups concerned with human rights have developed in America and in Israel.

In the wake of the attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, a number of Jewish religious leaders raised their voice against the vilification of Islam and the harassment of Muslims in America. Similarly, a number of Muslim leaders denounced the suicide bombings and the killing of innocent civilians in Israel. Such good intentions notwithstanding, the institutionalized Jewish-Muslim dialogue became virtually impossible amidst the continuous reports on killings and death in both the Israeli and Palestinian communities.<sup>38</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

As the interfaith dialogue in America heads into the twenty-first century, one can look back at over a century of Jewish intensive involvement in dialogue and reach some conclusions. The interfaith dialogue, essentially a liberal Christian initiative that concentrated on unresolved old-time issues as well as more current Jewish-Christian concerns, grew toward the latter part of the twentieth century to include discussions among Jews, Christians, and representatives of other religious communities as well. While the interfaith dialogue affected all members of the Jewish community, it remained overwhelmingly the domain of rabbis who became the official representatives of the Jewish community, its organizations, issues, and interests. Dialogue became part of the rabbis' communal responsibility, leaving out, at times, more secular, counterculture, or dissenting voices.

The interfaith dialogue groups have reached impressive achievements, serving as a vehicle to improve the relationship between Jews and non-Jews in America and thus advance the status of Jews in America and elsewhere. The dialogue has been particularly effective in putting to rest old prejudices and animosities and bringing about reconciliation between the communities. It has been somewhat less successful, however, when its agenda turned toward the Israeli-Arab conflict. Most liberal Christians refused to the pro-Israeli sentiments to reconciliation between the faiths. Paradoxically, just when the dialogue reached a historical peak in the late 1960s to 1970s, bringing an unprecedented improvement in the relationship between Christians and Jews, the dialogue reached a crisis and even a partial dead end. Christian groups that showed willingness to transform and reverse their opinion on Judaism and Jews refused to accept what seemed to them a noncritical Jewish enchantment with the State of Israel. Toward the end of the twentieth century, some Jews and non-Jews alike created alternative dialogue groups,

in which they voiced their more critical opinions or dialogued with groups that the Jewish and Christian establishments had excluded from the official dialogue.

The history of the interfaith dialogue and interfaith relationship in general has been that of progress, as the Christian majority has become more and more open toward Judaism and Jews. However, while interfaith relations have progressed dramatically, they have not brought about a full reconciliation between Jewish and non-Jewish groups in America, and pockets of bitterness and suspicions have certainly remained. Muslim–Jewish relations, for example, have developed much less favorably than Jewish–Christian relations. Interfaith dialogue in one form or another will therefore continue to be an important mechanism for renegotiation of communal relationships in America.

#### Notes

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## Section 4: *Jewish Art in America*

### 20 American midrash: Urban Jewish writing and the reclaiming of Judaism

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By the end of the tumultuous 1960s, a new vision of American Jewish writing emerged. Instead of the sociological fiction and psychological critique of immigrant assimilation, at the heart of novels such as Abraham Cahán's *The Rise of David Levinsky*,<sup>1</sup> religious issues and a Judaic rather than a secular Jewish perspective began to inform American Jewish fiction. As the father tells his son, Reuven Malter in 1967 in Chaim Potok's *The Chosen*, "It is strange what's happening. And it is exciting. Jack . . . joined a synagogue. He is helping . . . put up a new building so his grandchildren can go to a modern synagogue and have a good Jewish education. It is beginning to happen everywhere in America. A religious renaissance, some call it."<sup>2,3</sup>

As American Jews rediscovered their roots and planted new synagogues throughout the land, they founded Jewish schools, developed Jewish summer camps, visited Israel in increasing numbers in the heady days after the triumph of the Six Day War, and funded Jewish Studies programs at colleges and universities. These events and activities reinforced the new agenda for American Jewish literature, which took hold in the 1970s in a renewal of interest in classical Jewish texts, including the Bible, traditional parables, Hasidic tales, and *midrashim*. The rekindled interest in classical Jewish learning had an American turn and developed into an American midrashic style, which began to inform the fiction of the younger generation of writers.

#### AMERICAN MIDRASH

In reclaiming classical Jewish learning, the Jewish intellectuals of the 1960s and 1970s did not simply follow traditional storytelling habits at work in parables, *midrashim*, and Hasidic tales. They did not directly engage classic texts; rather, they discovered that what was missing in their explorations of American Jewish life were central meanings articulated in those texts and that traditional culture. They expressed this not in a literature of allusion but in an innovative strategy that brought the subtext of classic learning into the